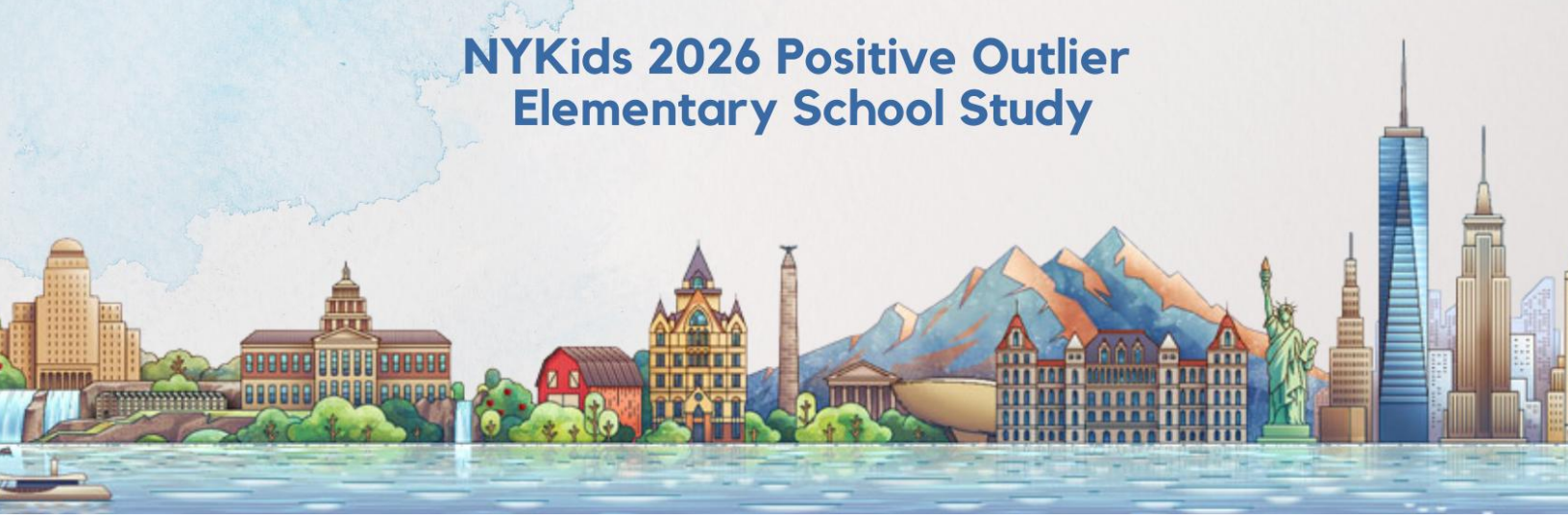


NYKids 2026 Positive Outlier Elementary School Study



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Kendall Elementary School Case Study

If you drive by [the school] on a Friday night or a Saturday, and there's an event going on, you can't find a parking spot. . . . You won't be able to walk in the auditorium. The support of the community is huge. – superintendent

Study Background

For over two decades, NYKids has been studying positive outlier schools to identify what is associated with their above-predicted student performance. This study seeks to identify promising practices in support of K-6 children’s development. As in all NYKids research, we characterize important contextual information including the district and school culture and climate; additionally, this study focuses attention on four main lines of inquiry: academic learning and programming; social-emotional learning and youth mental health; educator preparation, support, and organizational capacity; and family engagement and community relationships.

Scores on New York State English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics assessments for grades 3, 4, 5, and 6 (where applicable) and rates of chronic absenteeism for grades 1- 6 were used to identify positive outliers in this study.

School Context

Kendall Elementary School serves 346 students and is situated in a rural district just minutes from the shores of Lake Ontario. The school sits 30 miles northwest of the city of Rochester; as many educators and staff members described it, the community has a distinctive small-town feel where “everybody knows the kids,” as one teacher put it. The close ties between the school and surrounding community are exemplified by the district’s slogan, “One Family, One School, One

Community,” a phrase that points to the district’s commitment to collaboration and teamwork in the shared interest of supporting the children they serve.

With a small staff and resources sometimes constrained by the budget at their disposal, educators at Kendall acknowledge the tacit expectation to “wear many hats” (as many staff members attested), often serving as heads of clubs, sports, musicals, and other extracurricular events. The additional efforts made by all staff members also have the intent of making school an enjoyable and safe place for both staff and students, and, according to leaders, promote teacher retention and student attendance. Indeed, the walls of the school building are adorned with photos capturing celebrations, assemblies, field trips, and ceremonies illustrating how, in the words of several interviewees, “kids want to be here.” Part of making school enjoyable at Kendall is to provide children with opportunities to take an active role in their school and lead a number of activities such as emceeding student assemblies, managing an in-house coffee shop, and delivering the morning announcements.

Educators at Kendall Elementary exude a sense of pride in their accomplishments, and educators provide opportunities to celebrate their students’ successes. For instance, a visitor entering the school’s auditorium is greeted by banners hanging from the ceiling that recount academic achievements on state assessments in ELA, math, and science – scores which the principal noted are strong even compared to much larger and more well-resourced schools in the region. However, this does not mean that educators at Kendall rest on their laurels; staff members in all roles are encouraged by leaders to engage in what the principal called “strategic risks” designed to drive innovation and improvement.

High expectations for students are communicated directly and indirectly to all who enter the building, and despite a recent rise in behavioral challenges among younger students, many staff members noted that the strong school culture – or the “Kendall way” as the principal phrased it – helped ensure that disruptions were minor and struggling students received the supports they needed. The emphasis on promoting appropriate behavior across the school was seen by several staff members as a positive feature of the school that allows teachers to focus less on classroom management and more on pedagogy.

Student Demographics 2024-2025: Kendall Elementary School			
	Kendall Elementary School	Kendall Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-6	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	346	657	2,421,491
Economically Disadvantaged	52%	50%	60%
Students with Disabilities	17%	16%	20%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	12%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Black or African American	0%	0%	15%

Hispanic/Latino	6%	6%	31%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%	11%
White	88%	89%	39%
Multiracial	5%	4%	4%
Other	0%	0%	0%

Kendall Elementary School was selected as a high-performing school within an average-need, rural setting. It serves a population in which 52% of students are economically disadvantaged and 17% are identified as having disabilities. The student population is predominantly White (88%), with small representations of Hispanic and multiracial students. Kendall achieved an academic z score¹ of 2.00 and an attendance z score of 1.50, resulting in a composite z score of 1.75. This profile suggests a school that excels academically while maintaining strong student attendance.

Highlights

Innovating and Improving at all Levels

If we notice an area of need, and we know of something, whether somebody has used it, we can bring it to the table and say, “Hey, here’s this area of need. We see this is something that we know has been helpful in other places.” [Leaders] are open to really letting us explore those things. – teacher

All educators and staff members at Kendall reported being encouraged to bring new ideas to the table to support the academic performance and overall well-being of students. This culture of innovation is shared across the entire school; cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and teaching assistants are invited to contribute new ideas to improve the school. Without layers of decision-making authority, the district is able to quickly implement new programs and practices and drive innovation. While many educators at Kendall articulated pride in their many accomplishments, there is a consistent effort to improve all aspects of the school. As one district leader noted, “You don’t have to be bad to get better.”

Making School Enjoyable for Students and Staff

I want teachers to be happy teaching; I want them to enjoy being here. – principal.

¹ Note: A z score is a way of showing how far a value is from the average compared to other values. In simple terms, it tells you whether something is above or below typical performance, and by how much. A z score of 0 represents the average, where a z score of 1 means the value is one standard deviation above typical performance.

A goal mentioned repeatedly by educators at Kendall was to create an enjoyable school environment for students. Making school “fun” was described by teachers and leaders as a way not only to foster student engagement but also increase attendance. Through assemblies and events – often student-led – as well as extracurricular and community-based activities, educators at Kendall created a range of positive incentives for students to come to school and enjoy their time there. Leaders also made intentional efforts to make Kendall an enjoyable place for staff to work. Staff members reported that they generally felt supported and that their voices were heard by leaders. In addition, the emphasis on high behavioral expectations at Kendall helped to reduce the stress levels of teachers. “I’m not expecting chaos the second I walk in the doors . . . which is nice,” said one teacher.

Teamwork Driven by a Shared Vision

Everybody works as a team in this district. – support staff

Kendall Elementary is characterized by collaborative relationships between staff members who work closely together with one another to meet the needs of their student population. With a small staff, educators are able to communicate regularly with one another to offer support to colleagues or share information about a particular student. “We’re really close as a teaching staff, and we communicate with each other all the time,” noted one teacher. Recognizing that “there’s a lot of experts in the building” – as the principal put it – educators and staff endeavor to leverage the strengths and resources of individuals in order to solve problems and improve the educational experiences of students.

A Closer Look

These practices — the themes highlighted above — are evident throughout the four lines of inquiry that frame the study of which this case is one part. The sections below expand on each of these findings within the context of the study’s framework.

Culture, Climate and Community

If somebody comes to me and says, “What’s Kendall about?” It’s “One Family, One School, One Community.” We are the hub of this community. – superintendent

Increasing Attendance through Positive Reinforcement

A central aim of educators at Kendall Elementary is to make school a safe and enjoyable place for students, thereby improving student attendance. A long list of extracurricular activities, events, and programs help motivate students to come to school. For instance, educators have transformed the graduation ceremony into a “Color Splash” celebration where teachers, staff, and students cheer each other on and shower one another with colorful powder. “It’s really more of . . . a celebration, rather than a boring ceremony. . . . And the kids get into it,” explained a teacher. In addition to the multitude of activities available to students, the school grounds feature a new state-of-the-art playground, and the school has a student lounge that will soon be home to a new air hockey table, according to the principal. Kids are “happy” at Kendall, said one staff member. A teacher, for example, described how the engaging programs and practices at Kendall excite students and increase their attendance, “I have kids asking at recess to call Mom or Dad saying

what they were proud of. I have kids wanting to get pictures of themselves to send over ParentSquare . . . kids coming to school that don't usually come to school.”

Under the mantra of “Every minute matters,” staff members also leverage their relationships with students to promote attendance and participation, taking time to tell students that they “missed them” when they were not in school, as one teacher explained. Another example of this approach is personalized postcards sent by teachers to their students throughout the year. Several educators explained how these targeted strategies can reach students who may have had spotty attendance previously. For instance, a teacher described the impact that awarding a small academic scholarship had on a student who had been missing consecutive school days:

[N]ow he feels valued here, so he wants to come to school every day, and I suspect that he's not saying to Mom or Dad, “I don't want to go to school today,” because he enjoys the environment now and he wants to be here.

Overcoming Adversity through Community

Kendall’s motto of “One Family, One School, One Community” is far more than a catchy slogan — it is a way of life built on trust, top-down hospitality, and a town that fiercely shows up for its kids. While Kendall is uniquely small, the school actively leverages its size and location as a major advantage for family engagement. In this tight-knit community, generations of families know one another, allowing the school to maintain deep, long-standing connections. However, the staff never takes these bonds for granted; they remain intensely proactive about communicating with families and nurturing these partnerships. In return, the community is deeply invested in the success of its school.

In the last several years, the district suffered two losses of beloved teachers, and educators noted the far-reaching impact these tragedies had on staff and students alike. Through the grieving process, as the superintendent explained that the district and community reflected on its relationship and identity and ultimately became closer as a result: “We came together and we said to ourselves, ‘Alright, what do we see ourselves as? How are we going to move forward?’ Not past it, not forgetting, but ‘How do we move forward?’”

Developing a Culture of Innovation

A culture of innovation was evident at Kendall where leaders consistently encouraged all staff to come up with new ideas and were quick to support new initiatives when they offered positive additions to the school. The principal explained his approach to stimulating change at the school rather than maintaining the status quo: “I do want to change things, and I ask a lot of times, ‘Why do we have to do something this way?’ And I think that that lends itself to good discussions about ‘I don't know. Maybe we don't have to do it this way.’”

The small, close-knit leadership team of Kendall, the principal noted, also helps reduce impediments to implementing new ideas. “We don't have a bureaucracy,” he explained. A district leader similarly noted the “advantages” to the organizational structure of the school district: “Because we're small, because there's not a million people . . . from a student to my role, there's not a million roles there.”

Staff members take up the call for innovation and have developed a wide range of new initiatives including a “March Madness” basketball tournament for students and staff, a week of cafeteria lunches from different countries, and piloting a new phonics program for struggling readers. As one teacher put it, the “mentality” at Kendall is different than other schools: “There’s been a lot of schools I’ve been in that it just feels like kind of a ‘stay in your lane’ attitude. And that is not at all what we do here. . . . I just feel like there’s definitely a mentality around the school that if you have an idea, run with it and see where it goes.”

Academic Learning and Programming

If we can improve teaching, we can improve learning. – district leader

Integrating English Language Arts (ELA) and Math

Educators at Kendall described efforts to better integrate ELA and math and break down “silos” between the two content areas, as one teacher put it. Recognizing the interrelationship between literacy and math, teachers have begun to work across disciplines to align instructional strategies. “Our math tests are more reading tests,” said one teacher. Another similarly explained, “We know that without math, they can’t do literacy, and without literacy, [they can’t be] successful with math.” One shift has been the intentional use of the same vocabulary across content areas so that students repeatedly encounter the same terminology. “We’ve come up with five vocabulary words . . . you’ll see them in literacy, you’ll see them in math, you’re going to see them in science,” said one teacher.

In addition, both ELA and math teachers are now working more closely together to share data and develop goals that are mutually beneficial. As a teacher explained, “We were creating goals within each department and then realizing . . . that goal is very similar to this goal.” Another teacher added, “Why are we not just working together? It’s less confusing for the kids too.”

Fostering Real-World Skills in a Rural Setting

Kendall maximizes partnerships with local organizations to create engaging learning opportunities. While the surrounding area has limited organizational offerings, the district ensures that existing partnerships offer rich, real-world experiences. For example, while most schools have a school resource officer (SRO), Kendall explicitly connects their SRO to the Safety Squad mentioned above. Safety Squad members not only manage responsibilities within the school, but they also venture into the community to learn about the justice system and explore local career paths. The principal explained how members also collaborate with the Orleans County Sheriff’s Office on field trips throughout the local area, including the marine unit that patrols Lake Ontario and an animal shelter. “It’s a good learning experience. . . . I want kids to have different experiences,” explained the principal. The school also works with the highway department and Sheriff’s Office to host a “Bike to School Day” biannually so that students are able to safely bike to school.

Providing students with opportunities to see how the real world operates forms the basis of many of Kendall’s community partnerships. As described below, students discover what it takes to be an entrepreneur through the student-run coffee club, which includes visiting the actual business. The principal added, “I want kids to learn about service, and I want kids to have a real

experience with a real business.” Similarly, students visit a local bookstore to interact with an author and members of the local fire department regularly visit the school to discuss fire safety and promote activities like clearing snow from fire hydrants in the town. The principal described a recent effort to build relationships with local farms so that students may learn more about the science behind farming while also connecting the school more closely to the community and its agricultural identity. Through these partnerships, Kendall continuously seeks out unique opportunities to teach its students essential, real-life skills while instilling a deep sense of community service.

Letting Students Lead the Way

Students at Kendall Elementary are encouraged to take an active role in a number of extracurricular activities, clubs, and class projects. On Fridays, for instance, a group of fifth-graders participate in a “Coffee Club” where they sell freshly brewed coffee to staff members in an unused classroom (the student lounge mentioned above). Students measure and brew the coffee themselves and the money from each sale is put towards snacks for the entire school. The coffee for the club is provided by a local café that students visit to learn about the science behind coffee roasting; they also develop “soft skills” like customer service. “[Students] get that responsibility piece on top of the business side of it. But also they kind of give back to their teachers,” explained the principal.

Students are regularly invited to give input on decisions about their school. For instance, each year students vote on Election Day on an issue that directly impacts them such as the name of the school mascot, choosing items to include in their lunch, and selecting a staff member to serve as “Principal of the Day.” Events and assemblies are also viewed by educators at Kendall as opportunities to involve students as leaders and active participants. At a monthly SOAR assembly, students who have exhibited that month’s character traits are presented awards. Their peers play the music, announce the awards, and members of the Media Club take photos of the winners. Another example can be found in a “Student Author” section of the school library where patrons can take out books written by Kendall students. Events such as an annual Book Fair/Art Show and Spelling Bee (the latter of which began this year and was initiated by a student) offer additional opportunities to highlight students’ successes and “connect our students meaningfully to this building,” as the principal explained.



Figure 1. Student-run Coffee Shop

As mentioned above, Kendall has a student-led “Safety and Responsibility Squad” comprised of sixth grade students who are selected based on an application, interview, and community service. The principal noted that the program is designed to give students additional responsibilities in the

building such as walking younger students to classrooms and assisting with events and field trips. These students are also tasked with keeping students in the hallways and other school spaces as well as cleaning the cafeteria. “So it’s nice to give sixth graders who are the oldest in this building that sort of role, and then it kind of ties into . . . occupational things later on, if they’re interested in that, too,” explained a teacher. Another teacher noted how the members of Safety Squad serve as leaders for their peers by “setting the example of how to act in school.”

Social-Emotional Learning and Youth Mental Health

Whatever it is, whoever it is, we do what we can to take care of them . . . the kids are just, they’re like ours. – Superintendent

Creating a Relational Culture of Belonging and Awareness

At Kendall, social-emotional support is grounded in a relational culture in which students are deeply known by staff, included in school life, and viewed as active contributors to the school community. The mental health support for students at Kendall starts with relationships that are built across the school, ranging from the administration, to teachers, cafeteria staff, and bus drivers, who all have personal connections with students. A staff member shared that students are “not just a number” at Kendall and that everyone is aware when students are struggling. This emotional investment in students appeared to strengthen staff awareness of changes in students’ emotional well-being and social functioning. Multiple participants emphasized that Kendall’s small size allows staff across roles to know students personally and recognize changes in behavior or emotional well-being quickly. Rather than viewing social-emotional support as the responsibility of support staff, supporting student well-being is a task that is shared across the entire school community, from bus drivers and cafeteria workers to teachers and leaders.

As described above, Kendall educators strive to make students central to programs and activities that in most schools are led by adults. When educators and leaders develop new ideas, they strive to include all students in activities and let the students drive special programs and projects. Participants frequently described students not only as recipients of support, but also as collaborators and contributors within the community. The administration and teaching staff share a goal of keeping students at the center of groups and activities that benefit them, while promoting leadership, autonomy, and social-emotional growth. As described above, the staff at Kendall give students opportunities to lead programs and events; this gives students chances to apply social skills and learn to regulate emotions in situations they may find stressful. These opportunities allow students to practice communication, leadership, and emotional regulation skills in authentic settings, rather than through formal instruction alone.

This relational culture extends to the school’s approach toward students with disabilities and sensory or behavioral needs, and general education and special education teachers work together closely to ensure that all students’ needs are met. The school utilizes an integrated co-teaching (ICT) model that pairs general and special education teachers in the same classroom, and the district has recently shifted to a full-day of Pre-K to ensure that students who may require additional support are identified early. As an example of the inclusive environment in Kendall, teachers proudly reflected on the significant number of special education students who took prominent roles in the most recent school play.

Delivering Responsible and Flexible Student Support

Participants across staff roles acknowledged the increasing mental and behavioral health challenges prevalent among their students. Most participants attributed these challenges to increased technology use, cyberbullying, shortened attention spans, and residual effects from the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have introduced what staff see as a decrease in emotional regulation, an increase in anxiety, and a limited ability to use coping skills, especially in younger students.

What is unique at Kendall is that staff across roles respond to these challenges with flexibility, collaboration, and relationship-centered support. Rather than relying solely on formalized interventions, staff described using ongoing communication and problem solving to adapt support to individual student needs. For instance, educators described a sensible approach to supporting students who may struggle getting through an entire school day, such as getting picked up early, taking regular breaks, or switching classrooms for certain content areas. These accommodations are gradually reduced as students become more comfortable at school. District leaders also added resources at the elementary school to support students' well-being. A school counselor was added four years ago to the district, and Kendall also partners with Orleans County Department of Mental Health to provide counseling services to students in need. Such resources are crucial given that accessing services can be a significant barrier for families in rural areas such as Kendall. A sensory room using grant funding from COVID-19 has been installed on school grounds to help dysregulated students.

Balancing Compassion with High Behavioral Expectations

Although staff at Kendall emphasized compassion, relationship building, and emotional support, educators also described the importance of maintaining clear behavioral expectations and orderly learning environments. Some staff viewed emotional support and accountability as complementary rather than opposing goals. Staff described an approach in which relationships with students are prioritized first, but behavioral concerns are addressed directly through conversations and reflection. Efforts are made at Kendall to help students regulate their emotions, persevere through frustration, and re-engage in tasks rather than relying on punitive discipline; yet support staff such as counselors and school psychologists understand that disruptive students can impact the learning for other kids in the room, so they will pull students out for a problem-solving conversation. “We have high expectations for [students],” explained the principal.

Teachers noted how, despite increasing behavioral challenges, Kendall continues to maintain a positive learning environment. Several participating school staff described their students as generally respectful and accepting of peer differences, particularly in comparison to their experiences in other school districts. Leaders and teachers both shared that when educators from neighboring districts have visited Kendall, they comment on how quiet the school is and that they are used to school environments being more chaotic. As one teacher noted, “Even though we have behaviors that challenge us . . . when people come to visit our classrooms, they see a very different picture of [the] students we have here versus what they may be used to.”

At the same time, some educators expressed frustration with what they perceived as reduced disciplinary consequences in schools following the disruptions of COVID-19 and the deleterious impacts of technology and social media. Despite these challenges, staff emphasized the need to approach students with compassion, flexibility, and a commitment to helping them succeed behaviorally and academically.

Educator Preparation, Support, and Organizational Capacity

I think we as a staff have a really good open communication . . . we know our kids inside and out, so we're not afraid to go ask [our colleagues for help]. – teacher

Staffing with Purpose

While the small size of Kendall was regularly mentioned by educators as a positive feature of the school, many also acknowledged that it requires staff members to “wear many hats.”

Recognizing the need for team members to be multifaceted in their skillset, leaders at Kendall purposefully hire staff members capable of handling a range of different duties. “It really comes down to people, and [the superintendent] makes sure that we have the right people and that the right people are supported,” explained a district leader. For instance, the Pupil Personnel Services Director also oversees curriculum and instruction for the district. Similarly, a Director of Technology with over two decades of teaching experience joined the district to support integration of instructional technology in classrooms while also performing administrative duties such as classroom observations. Teachers, too, take on a range of duties beyond their roles in the classroom such as leading clubs, extracurriculars, and events like musicals.

Although staff members acknowledged that managing these responsibilities is not always easy, many explained that the shared desire to support students and their colleagues motivated them to go above and beyond the workday. “We all just want to see our kids do well, and want our school to succeed, so we step in where we can,” explained one teacher. A district leader shared a similar sentiment, “You gotta love your job. You gotta love children. You gotta want to make a difference.”

Focusing on Educator Retention

As in many school districts throughout New York State, Kendall has experienced a shortage of candidates for new positions. Although leaders described efforts to attract new teachers to vacant roles, such as passing out flyers at job fairs, a major focus has been to retain the teachers who are hired. “But when you hire somebody, that's just step one. How do you support them? That, to me, that's bigger than even hiring somebody,” explained the superintendent.

As described above, the support for students with behavioral challenges was seen by leaders as critical factors that improved staff retention. Another adaptation designed to help support teacher retention was the decision to extend the mentoring program for new teachers to include a second year. A teacher noted the positive impact that the mentoring program has had on newer staff:

We're really supporting our newer teachers and making sure that they are feeling supported and they have a trusted person in the building to talk to as they build relationships around the building. So I think that support is very, very helpful.

Using Data to Make Decisions and Set Goals

Data drive decisions at Kendall – from what goes in classrooms to district-level goal setting and everything in between. In terms of the latter, the superintendent described the district’s recent undertaking of a new five-year strategic plan guided, in part, by feedback from community and staff members. Pedagogical and curricular decisions are also guided by data collected from numerous sources such as New York State standardized exams and benchmark assessments. As a district leader put it, “We love data here at Kendall.”

A Literacy Specialist and Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) act as data specialists for the district and have developed their own programs for ELA and math to track student progress beyond what is offered through the curricular programs used at the school. Housing these data in one space accessible to all teachers provides a wider snapshot of student progress over time and allows educators to target particular areas for improvement – either for individual students or across entire content areas and grade levels. The TOSAs also compare benchmark assessments in ELA and math against state tests to evaluate the efficacy of the curricular programs being used in the district. In addition to meeting three times per year for data meetings, a gap analysis is held over the summer where educators break down the performance of students on state assessments question by question. Despite not being mandated, these data meetings are widely attended by educators. A teacher elaborated on the utility of these sessions:

[Teachers] have the past data so that they can look at their scores from the previous year, any regression that they had over the summer. So they get this when they come into the school year . . . the teachers analyze it, come up with goals and work on those throughout the year.

Professional development (PD) is also informed by data at Kendall. For instance, a district leader described how data from state exams provides information on which areas of teaching could be strengthened:

But from there [the data] is really trickling down to building leaders and doing PD to target the areas that we're weak in. And then it's the department leaders working with their grade levels to be able to really home in on “How does it affect students? How can we put this in the classroom?”

Family Engagement and Community Relationships

Every school wants to say what our motto is . . . “One School, One Family, One Community.” But we truly are. We’re the hub . . . the community really trusts us.
– principal.

Serving as the Community Hub

Educators at Kendall view its small size as an asset and an opportunity to serve as the hub of the community. For instance, the superintendent explained that the new playground was built with the intent for children in the community to be able to play locally instead of traveling to neighboring towns. Kendall Elementary also hosts a dizzying number of events to engage families and community members. These range from typical school functions such as sporting events, plays, cookie sales, fundraising events, scarecrow festivals, and Student of the Month lunches, to more unique events such as the Wild Kratts Night (based on a popular PBS series), a conservation project in which students learn about animals and their adaptations, which culminates in a massive communitywide event. Local vendors, including Braddock Bay Raptors (a conservationist group), libraries, Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts, and local radio stations all come out to promote conservation while families win prizes and receive awards.

Another crowd-pleaser described by educators is the third-grade Wax Museum project. After writing biographies on influential historical figures, students dress up and memorize facts about their lives. They practice with peers first, then invite families the next day to watch their children act out the biography. The school also combines Grandparents’ Day with Rocket Day, allowing grandparents to watch students launch rockets they built in class. These events are consistently packed with families and community members. As a teacher explained:

People from the community come and . . . they do feel like a community, like a family, because everybody does know everybody. . . . You’ll see families that don’t even have kids coming to sporting events . . . the connection that you start from the ground-up here is strong. And so those families are invested in the district.

This supportive relationship extends far beyond school functions. When a local family is in need, the staff and other families rally to donate time, money, and resources. This reciprocal support embodies the togetherness of the school motto. As a teacher noted, “We do fundraisers, whether it’s within the school or within the community.”

Building Deep Roots

Beyond hosting events to boost participation, Kendall’s small size helps build deep, long-lasting relationships. Teachers frequently find themselves teaching the children of former students and use that generational connection to strengthen family ties. As one teacher explained, “[W]hen we make class lists, we keep in mind . . . ‘Oh, [student] had this teacher.’ So we’ll keep that same family with that teacher because they’re comfortable with their teaching style.” This continuity eliminates the initial awkwardness of getting to know a new family, allowing educators to dive straight into supporting the student.

In addition to these generational bonds, nearly half of Kendall’s staff members live in the town. The superintendent described how this deeply rooted investment is a major asset for the school:

[The school and community are] so intertwined, it's great. . . . [teachers] are so invested and they want to do so much for the school because their kids go here . . . they want to make the school better. . . . I think that's huge because they're also out there talking to other residents about what's going on and looking out for those kids.

While the lack of separation can occasionally pose challenges – such as maintaining anonymity for students and families when an incident occurs – the staff largely views it as a rewarding feature of the district. A teacher reflected on the importance of community connections for potential hires: “When we interview people, we ask kind of those leading questions to see how they feel about . . . building connections with community members and reaching out to parents.”

Communicating Consistently and Clearly

Even though Kendall’s small size and packed event calendar keeps parents engaged, staff members do not take this connection for granted; they communicate constantly to keep families informed. While the district relies on ParentSquare as its main communication tool, teachers also use phone calls, face-to-face chats at student pickup, monthly newsletters, and weekly home-school connection flyers. The district even partners with a media representative through the regional Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to advertise community events.

Teachers make a conscious effort to share both positive and negative updates, and ParentSquare has been instrumental in maintaining this balance. As a teacher explained, “[My co-teacher] and I . . . try to touch base not just when there's a problem. We try to touch base and say, ‘Look . . . this was so exciting to see, they did a great job.’” In fact, this open line of communication is so pervasive that teachers have had to establish boundaries for their personal time. A teacher explained that “parents are very open to reaching out,” adding “to the point where we've almost had to be like, it is okay to turn ParentSquare off and not look at it till the next morning.”

Sharing school events and student progress is only one piece of the puzzle; Kendall also uses this constant feedback loop to drive districtwide improvement. For example, when developing their "Portrait of a Graduate," the district surveyed the community for input. The mutual respect between the school and the town was evident in the high response rate and the district's commitment to valuing that feedback. The superintendent explained how the survey gained over 300 responses, showing the kind of “investment” the community has in the district and the constant desire to continue improving:

We created a survey, sent it out to all staff and community. . . . It kind of shows us really that investment of the community and people that want to have their voices heard. So we're going to take that information and really look at it, break it down. . . . And that's the idea – how do we get better? You know, you can look at test scores, you can look at graduation rates. . . . You could say, “Wow, they're doing well.” We're doing well, okay, but how do we get great? How do we become great? And I think that's just the input from kids, staff, community.

In a Nutshell

At Kendall Elementary a tight-knit community, strong relationships, and a culture of innovation drive academic success. Educators proudly “wear many hats” and work collaboratively with one another to meet the needs of students. A major goal of staff at Kendall is to make learning enjoyable for students and foster opportunities for students to lead the way. With high behavioral expectations for students and deeply rooted connections to families and communities, educators at Kendall take to heart the district’s motto of “One Family, One School, One Community.”

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